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WASHINGTON REPORT
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June 11, 1980

DELAYING NURSING HOME CARE FOR THE ELDERLY

Two weeks ago a Special Subcommittee of the Health and the Environment Committee I chair, held hearings in Los Angeles on a vital subject: What can we do to help the elderly and chronically ill live independently for as long as possible?

The issue of independent living for the elderly becomes more important each day as the percentage of our population over 65 years of age increases. In the not too distant future, a very substantial proportion of all Americans will be senior citizens. Usually with age come a variety of illnesses. Usually with age comes a decline in ability to handle all the tasks one handled with ease in younger years. Does it follow from these facts of life that the majority of older people must move from their own homes and apartments to rest homes or convalescent hospital institutions? I think not.

One point must be made with absolute clarity: REST HOMES AND CONVALESCENT HOSPITALS ARE ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL. For many people it would be literally impossible to go on living without skilled nursing care and other benefits provided by an institution which specializes in gerontological problems. What I am concerned about are the millions of older people who can, under the right circumstances and with the right kind of assistance, function perfectly well outside an institutional setting.

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What is preventing us from making headway in independent home care for the elderly? Ironically, the federal government is one of the main culprits. Under current Medicare and Medical rules little of the attention provided to institutionalized patients is covered on a home care basis.

I have learned from experts in the field that a surprisingly wide range of sophisticated health care services can be provided at home. However, patients must be supplied with the necessary equipment, periodic attention from appropriate doctors, nurses or therapists and a truly comprehensive understanding of their problems and treatment needs. Such home health services can be provided at a fraction of the cost of even the most inexpensive institutional care.

I have authored a bill, HR 6194, that would introduce changes in the federal law to encourage states to pursue every possible avenue for increased home health care services. My bill aims also at making our health care laws more consistent and more orderly so that patients can receive the rights to which they are entitled in a simple, straightforward way without having to juggle the eligibility provisions of one or another program.

For those who need a licensed rest home or convalescent hospital facility there is no better place in the world for him or her to receive the care needed to preserve and prolong life. For those who do not really need such a facility it is an undesirable place for them. The inevitable regimen of an institutional setting deprives them of their independence and mobility. There is even some evidence that the relatively unstimulating environment of an institution may prematurely induce deterioration of mental faculties. Finally, as many of us know from personal experience, feelings of depression, rejection and worthlessness are often unwelcome side effects of premature or unnecessary institutionalization.

I pledge to seek more and better alternatives for senior citizens coping with the problems of old age and ill health.

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